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SUBJECT: Prime Minister Meets with Protestant Leaders

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This is a joint Hanoi-HCMC report.

Summary and Comment

1. (SBU) Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung met July 24 with the leaders of Vietnam's two officially recognized Protestant churches to welcome their contributions to national development while cautioning against the use of religion for "hostile purposes." During the meeting, the PM reportedly promised to facilitate the return of confiscated properties and to ease the approval of some churches and congregations in the Central Highlands. In subsequent public remarks, which were widely broadcast and printed here, the Prime Minister also applauded reported plans to merge the two churches, although church leaders note that the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN) and Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) remain far apart on several issues, including the question of who would lead a unified church. While the PM publicly admonished local officials to effectively implement Vietnam's Ordinance on Religion and Belief and the Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism, he made no public reference to registering churches or recognizing new religious groups. End Summary and Comment.

Prime Minister Greets Protestant Leaders...

2. (SBU) On July 24, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung met with Protestant pastors and dignitaries from the Executive Board of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) and Pastor Phung Quang Huyen, President of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN). In widely broadcast and printed remarks, the Prime Minister welcomed the contributions of Protestants to the cause of national development. The GVN has always respected and ensured citizens' religious as well as non-religious freedom, but it would fight against hostile forces' attempts to take advantage of religious belief to undermine the country's Doi Moi (renovation) process. The Prime Minister said he hopes that local authorities will effectively implement the Ordinance on Religion and Belief and the Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism. Furthermore, the two churches should uphold their principles and mobilize their followers to be "vigilant" against the trickery of hostile forces that may attempt to divide the "great national unity." PM Dung also applauded the wish of the two churches to merge under a single Evangelical Church of Vietnam.

...But Too Early to Talk of ECVN-SECV Merger

3. (SBU) Rev. Au Quang Vinh, the ECVN's General Secretary, told us that the SECV Executive Board members had traveled to Hanoi to pay a courtesy call on the Prime Minister and discuss with ECVN Executive Board members the issue of possibly merging the two churches under

the same roof. Vinh added, however, that there had been no plan for members of the ECVN Executive Board to join in the meeting with PM Dzung until the "last minute." In fact, five of six members of the ECVN's Executive Board refused to go to the meeting. However, the GVN's Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) ultimately succeeded in persuading ECVN President Phung Quang Huyen to be present at the meeting, and he was joined by "an ordinary pastor."

14. (SBU) On the subject of merging the two churches, apparently the CRA had "jumped the gun" in its presentation to the Prime Minister, Vinh continued. There have been no formal meetings or interactions between the ECVN and the SECV following a resolution passed by the SECV General Assembly in 2005 calling on the SECV Executive Board to conduct discussions with the ECVN on a possible merger. Members of the two executive boards were only planning to meet on July 26 for the first time to discuss various aspects of a possible merger.

15. (SBU) Vinh cited "objective reasons" as well as differences between the two churches in predicting a long and complicated road to the two churches' merger. One key objective reason, according to him, is the lack of a dominant leader in either the SECV or the ECVN to guide the two groups through their discussions. One of the differences is the two organizations' disagreement on whether to re-establish "Protestant districts" to address requests for assistance from congregations that feel they have been let down by both the ECVN and SECV, leading to the congregations' "secession" from one organization or the other. The SECV's most recent charter provides that provincial Protestant representative boards be established to deal with the issue, while ranking members of the ECVN believe that "Protestant districts" must be re-established.

16. (SBU) The other issue of concern to the ECVN is that of a new, unified organization's leadership. ECVN Executive Board members are afraid that a single executive board would be dominated by southerners given the overwhelming number of southern church members. This in turn could hamper church efforts to reach out to remote, mountainous areas in the north. (Note: According to

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current statistics, there are about 550,000 and 130,000 Protestants affiliated with the SECV and the ECVN, respectively. End Note.)

The View from the SECV

17. (SBU) SECV Secretary General Le Van Thien and Chairman Thai Phuoc Truong told ConGenOff by phone that they are cautiously optimistic following the meeting with PM Dzung and a separate meeting with the central-level CRA. The atmospherics in the Dzung meeting were very good; they hoped that it would lead to faster results. According to the SECV officials, Dzung promised "in principle to return confiscated SECV churches and properties, but noted that the details needed to be worked out with the CRA. Dzung also informed the SECV that "in near future" congregations and churches in Central Highlands will be approved faster and more transparently. The two SECV leaders noted that Dzung also mentioned that he received a letter of congratulations from President Bush, and noted that it is a "good sign."

18. (SBU) The SECV leaders said that, following their courtesy call with the PM, they had a longer and more substantive meeting with the CRA. At that meeting, they reportedly told the CRA that the SECV needs "concrete actions to back up GVN promises." The SECV leaders said that they presented the CRA with a detailed list of requests that they wished to have fulfilled by the end of 2007, but sooner if possible. These included:

-- Return of 217 churches and protestant properties (135 in the Central Highlands). The top priority is the return of the former SECV headquarters in downtown HCMC, which now is being used a youth cultural house.

-- Construction of a Theological Institute in HCMC's District 2. The SECV leaders said that last week, HCMC People's Committee Vice Chairman Nguyen Van Dua instructed the Department of Construction to speed up the permit process for the building, which has been pending

for at least six months. According to the SECV, if all approvals are granted, construction could begin in August.

-- Unification of the SECV and ECVN. However, the SECV leaders acknowledged that "certain individuals" on the ECVN Executive Board are resisting the merger.

-- Publication of Bibles and other religious materials in five major ethnic languages in the Central Highlands. According to the officials, former Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan promised to carry out this request in a meeting with the SECV in early 2006, but the SECV has not yet seen progress.

-- Accelerated approval for registration and recognition of congregations, pastor promotions and transfers and special events and celebrations.

-- Opening permanent SECV training schools in eight provinces in the Central Highlands and the Mekong Delta.

-- GVN facilitation of overseas training for SECV pastors.

Comment

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19. (SBU) This rare show of public support for Protestantism by the Prime Minister so early in his tenure is welcome. However, we would note that, although PM Dung called on local authorities to effectively implement Vietnam's legal framework on religion, there was no public mention of registering new congregations or recognizing new religious groups. While his call to protect "national unity" from "hostile forces" may be no more than the usual pro-forma language needed to assuage hardliners in the Communist Party, that excuse has been used in the past to slow the process of legalization of a number SECV congregations in the Central Highlands. For their part, SECV officials almost certainly recognize that some elements of the SECV "wish list," particularly the rapid return of a large number of properties, are unrealistic; return of some key properties in HCMC and other locations (such as the former SECV seminary in Nha Trang) probably would suffice for the near term. The SECV also understands that it must overcome opposition from the ECVN to a merger before it can realistically press this demand -- allowable under Vietnam's legal framework -- with the GVN. End Comment.

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